

REVIEW ESSAY

THE RED GUARD GENERATION REVISITED

The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China. By GUOBIN YANG. Columbia University Press, 2016. 290 pp. \$60, £49.95 (cloth); \$26, £20.95 (paper); \$59.99, £49.95 (ebook).

Red Legacies in China: Cultural Afterlives of the Communist Revolution. Edited by JIE LE and ENHUA ZHANG. Harvard University Press, 2016. 424 pp. \$39.95, £29.95 (paper).

Red Shadows: Memories and Legacies of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Edited by PATRICIA THORNTON, PEIDONG SUN, and CHRIS BERRY. xii + 409 pp. Cambridge University Press, 2017. \$33.99, £26.99 (paper).

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People routinely refer to the Cultural Revolution and Mao Zedong as two subjects that are “sensitive” to write and even talk about in today’s People’s Republic of China (PRC). This is true, but not all “sensitive” events and individuals are created equal—or handled the same way by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). When it comes to the June 4th Massacre, another “sensitive” event, and Liu Xiaobo, another “sensitive” figure, all public and even some relatively private forms of discussion are blocked. The goal is to make them both forgotten, as Louisa Lim argues in her important, aptly titled 2014 Oxford book, *The People’s Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited*. The CCP’s aim with the Cultural Revolution and Mao, by contrast, is not to blot out but control memory, not stop but steer the direction and constrain the scope of research, discussion, and commemoration. Last year, when the fiftieth anniversary of the first Red Guard rallies passed, there was, tellingly, muted discussion in all parts of the PRC other than Hong Kong but, equally tellingly, not a complete June 4th anniversary style blackout. Mainland bookstores stock novels dealing with the Cultural Revolution but not June 4th, and texts by and biographies of Mao but not Liu. And so on.

When it comes to the Cultural Revolution, what do Mao’s successors strive to do? One thing is to minimize investigation into some specific things that happened during the decade-long period, sometimes described as “ten years of turmoil,” which stretched from the 1966 forming of the Red Guards to the 1976 arrest of the Gang of Four. Another is to avoid a thorough assessment of who should be blamed for the “turmoil”—other than the demonized, scapegoated quartet made up of Mao’s widow, Jiang Qing, and three men. When it comes to Mao, the CCP would like people to focus on the things that he did *before* the final ten years of his life, especially during the lead up to Japan’s surrender in 1945 and the lead up to the so-called “liberation” of 1949. Taken together, the aim is to get China’s populace to think of the Cultural Revolution as a dark period that stands apart completely from two other eras: a glorious earlier one whose highlight was the founding of the PRC, and a wonderful later one of “reform and opening,” said to still be underway, that has seen the country grow richer and increase its global clout.

One achievement of the recent burst of high quality international scholarship on the Cultural Revolution has been to expose the folly of treating the decade as a free-floating anomaly. Yes, it was an unusual period during which unique things happened. Nevertheless, as the best recent work shows, the Cultural Revolution should not be detached from what came before or what

came after. Yang Guobin's *The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China*, which I consider the most significant individually authored work published during 2016's anniversary year, is a case in point. It is impressively researched, clearly written, and nuanced. It is based on many interviews and deep immersion in Red Guard writings. It shows how much the Cultural Revolution has influenced the Reform era, and also how members of the generation born around 1949 were shaped by things that happened in the past, as well as by the representations of those events to which they were exposed continually during their childhoods.

Before saying more about Yang's accomplishment, and how the sociologist's analytical moves complement those found in other valuable twenty-first-century works, it is worth noting that detaching the Cultural Revolution Decade from the general sweep of modern Chinese history is not something that only Mao's successors have done. Sometimes, even scholars who have thought of themselves as very skeptical of CCP official lines have glossed over continuities between the Red Guards and members of other generations, from student protesters of the Republican era (1912–49) to participants in the Democracy Wall and Tiananmen struggles. In a spirit of "self-criticism," which seems appropriate for an essay on the Mao era, I will use some examples from my own work to illustrate this point.

In August 1986, I took my first trip to China and, having read a fair amount about the late Mao years, I was struck immediately by some things about Fudan University, where I spent the academic year, and the city of Shanghai as a whole that made both different from their Cultural Revolution incarnations. There was a still a big Mao statue at Fudan, for example, but students did not treat it as a sacred object, instead hitting tennis balls against its base. In downtown Shanghai, I saw few images of paramount leader Deng Xiaoping's face and bookstores were not filled with his collected writings.

Something happened a few months later that seemed in some ways to be a revival of a Cultural Revolution phenomenon, but ended up just reinforcing my sense of distance from that era: students took to the streets. The students in this first important wave of post-Mao campus unrest, though, did not, as the Red Guards had, use violence or express fervent loyalty to any current political leader. When campus authorities put up a notice chastising them for acting like "New Red Guards," this struck me as a relatively ahistorical effort to discredit the new generation of activists. Their actions struck me as having much less in common with the Red Guards than with the protesters of the 1910s–1940s who were the subject of my dissertation research while in Shanghai. I felt the same way about the Tiananmen protests that I watched from afar two years later when back in Berkeley finishing my dissertation. As a result, when I brought post-1949 period events into the epilogue to my dissertation-based first book, I only made passing comments about the Cultural Revolution decade and focused on parallels between the era before Mao's rise and the protests of 1986–89. I did not claim that there were *no* connections at all between the student activists of the pre-1949, the activists of 1986–89, and the Red Guard generation. I felt, though, that it was justifiable to focus on the connections between the middle group and those of the Republican era.

Later, I came to feel that I was too ready to ignore links between the Cultural Revolution era and other periods. I have made this clear in some later writings on Tiananmen, such as a *Thesis Eleven* essay that I co-wrote with Craig Calhoun, "Legacies of Radicalism: China's Cultural Revolution and the Democracy Movement of 1989" (vol. 57, number 1, May 1999, pp. 33–52), which argued that distaste for official uses of Red Guard analogies to discredit protesters throughout the 1980s should not blind us to there being some kinds of parallels and connections. In addition, recent return trips to China have sometimes led me to wonder if some things that had seemed to disappear after Mao's death had merely mutated or gone into a kind of dormant phase. Most obviously, while Xi Jinping is very different from Mao in some ways, such as showing none of the same fondness for messy forms of mass mobilization, you now see his book prominently displayed in bookstores and his face on many posters.

Returning to Yang's book, two of the many arguments he makes in it are especially worth emphasizing. First, he wants us to take seriously the role that exposure to stories about and images of past events had on members of his book's eponymous generation. He notes, for example, that the youths who engaged in the Chongqing street battles he deals with in detail early in his book grew up steeped in tales of and films about the guerilla battles fought against Japanese invaders. Echoing a theme that comes through powerfully in the 2003 Long Bow documentary "Morning Sun" directed by Carma Hinton and Geremie Barmé (full disclosure: I was one of the film's historical consultants), he encourages readers to think of Red Guards as acting the way they did in part because of a need to take bold actions that would make them feel like and seem worthy successors to the heroic generations of revolutionaries who came before them. This led some Red Guards to go on pilgrimages that retraced the paths taken by earlier revolutionaries, strike poses like those taken by actors in revolutionary operas, use rhetoric to denigrate domestic opponents that were like those their predecessors had used to vilify foreign ones, and mimic military maneuvers developed for use in totally different settings. Top-down works focusing on Mao's aims sometimes avoid grappling with the crucial question of understanding how young people in China did such hard-to-fathom things in the mid-1960s, but this kind of explanation, emphasizing issues of emulation to prove self-worth, helps solve this puzzle.

Second, Yang shows in wonderfully detailed ways how the experiences that Red Guards had during the early campus activism and street fighting stage of the Cultural Revolution, as well as the following one that so many spent as sent-down youth, shaped their later views and commitments. Whether or not they rejected specific ideas from their youths, and no matter how they have tried to work through traumatic things they experienced, the words, beliefs, and patterns of those formative years have had long and complex half-lives. Going far beyond the surface comments I have made above about some late Mao-era phenomena, such as China's having a leader whose face and writings seem to be everywhere now, Yang makes a compelling case that the Reform era, especially the part of it that sees members of the Red Guard generation in positions of great power, needs to be seen as a product of forces set in motion during the Cultural Revolution.

In teasing out influences of the late Mao years on post-Mao developments, Yang's work complements recent work on other subjects: for example, studies of late 1970s dissent by scholars such as Lauri Paltemaa (see his "The Democracy Wall Movement, Marxist Revisionism, and the Variations on Socialist Democracy," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 16 (53), 2007, pp. 601–625) that emphasize the role that former Red Guards played in the Democracy Wall Movement and the echoes of some Cultural Revolution themes in manifestoes of the time. His book's forward-looking sections also make it an excellent one to read in tandem with two significant collections of essays published in the same year, which showcase work by historians, literary scholars, film scholars, political scientists, anthropologists, and others, including scholars originally from, and in some cases still based in, the PRC.

One of the anniversary year collections that pairs well with Yang's book is *Red Legacies in China: Cultural Afterlives of the Communist Revolution* (Harvard, 2016). Coedited by two US-based scholars, Jie Li and Zhang Enhua, it includes impressive essays on a wide range of topics, from the shifting meanings and uses of Cultural Revolution posters (the subject of a chapter by historian and gender studies scholar Harriet Evans) to the changing nature and significance of a museum devoted to the history of Communism (a chapter by cultural historian Denise Y. Ho). Particularly creative contributions to this wide-ranging volume include two by literary scholars: Chen Xiaomei's comparison of lavishly produced historically themed dramatic spectacles from the 1960s and the early 2000s, and Lee Haiyan's exploration of the careers of Mao impersonators before and after 1976.

The second anniversary year collection that is good to read in tandem with Yang's book is *Red Shadows: Memories and Legacies of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*. Edited by Oxford political scientist Patricia Thornton, Fudan historian Peidong Sun, and Chris Berry, a film specialist at

King's College London, it appeared as a special issue of the *China Quarterly* late last year (#227, September 2016) and then came out as standalone Cambridge University Press book early in 2017. Many chapters in *Red Shadows* try, like those in *Red Legacies*, to connect Cultural Revolution phenomena to things that came after, but several things distinguish the Cambridge volume from the Harvard one. For example, the former contains more work that takes a social scientific rather than cultural studies approach to issues (though there are exceptions: e.g., a good essay by Michael Dutton), as well as more work by scholars who had either published books on the Cultural Revolution before 2016 (e.g., Andrew Walder and Roderick MacFarquhar) or had ones come out during that anniversary year (Frank Dikötter).

Another thing worth noting about *Red Shadows* is that it contains two intriguing pieces that are less concerned with moving across a temporal divide than engaging in another form of border crossing, while largely staying within the chronological confines of the Cultural Revolution decade. One of these is co-editor Sun Peidong's "The Collar Revolution: Everyday Clothing in Guangdong as Resistance in the Cultural Revolution," which shows what can be learned by crossing the divide between the study of political movements and the study of quotidian life. The other is Julia Lovell's "The Cultural Revolution and Its International Legacies," which moves outward from China to other parts of the world. We will likely continue to see more work on the Cultural Revolution in the future that crosses these kinds of divides as well as chronological ones—something that was also done in a pair of worthy edited collections that came out before the anniversary year: *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism* (Harvard, 2015), which was co-edited by Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, and Alexander Cook's *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).